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Chapter One

RUSS

HENRY'S EYES ARE BURNING INTO me from across the living room. "Your summer is going to suck."

There's an echo of snorts from my teammates, the loudest coming from Mattie, Bobby, and Kris, who all told me something similar when I said no to joining them in Miami this summer.

"Inspiring words, Turner," I shoot back at my unimpressed roommate. "You should become a motivational speaker."

"You'll be sorry you didn't listen to me when you're stuck doing manual labor and team-building activities at staff training next week." Henry continues to flick through the Honey Acres brochure, his forehead creasing with a frown the further he gets into it. "What's night duty?"

"I have to sleep in a room attached to the campers' cabin twice a week in case they need anything," I say casually, watching Henry's eyes widen in horror. "The rest of the time I sleep in my own cabin."

"It's a no from me," he says, throwing the brochure back onto the coffee table. "Good luck, though."

"Could be worse," Robbie muses from across the living room. "You could have to move to Canada this summer."

ing at Maple Hills for grad school and is happy to retain his title as party planner.

That said, no one looks particularly enthusiastic about preparing the house for the horde of Maple Hills students descending on us in a few hours. I know it feels like the end of an era for the guys; four years is a long time to spend every day with someone. For Nate and Robbie, it's even longer; they haven't ever lived in different towns, never mind different countries.

For me, it feels like the start of one. I joined a fraternity at the beginning of school because I wanted a family that wouldn't let me down like my real one does. I thought my frat brothers would be there through the good and the bad, that I'd finally have people I could rely on, but it didn't happen. I sensed I'd made a mistake freshman year, but I persevered, thinking it'd take a while to feel like family. I knew I'd made a mistake when all the shit happened with the rink at the start of the year and the only people who were there for me are in this room.

It was the worst time of my life, which says a lot, and I was bottling up how embarrassed I felt. Then one day Henry asked me if I was all right and I told him I was fine. I expected that to be the end of it, but he told me he knew I was lying and he'd be back when I was ready to talk. Every week we had the same conversation, until I bumped into him over winter break.

I'd tried to go home, but only lasted twenty-four hours with my dad's post-casino-loss drunk, incoherent bullshit, and my mom's borderline professional inability to hold him accountable for his actions before I was on my way back to campus. Henry was heading to the hockey house to get his art supplies, and when he saw me, he asked me if I was all right, and for the first time, I told him no.

After spending so many years too ashamed and angry about my dad's gambling problem to tell anyone, it all came tumbling out like

word vomit. Not even Coach Faulkner or Nate know the full extent of my home life, but I told Henry fucking everything.

He stood there, a canvas tucked under his arm, listening.

When I was done, feeling like a ton of bricks had been lifted from my shoulders, he asked me if I wanted to get Kenny's wings and hang out with him over the break. He didn't ask me questions, he didn't offer advice, he didn't judge me. That's why I immediately said yes when he asked if I wanted to live with him and Robbie.

The room has descended into chaos like it always does when everyone is together, with multiple conversations overlapping, the next louder than the last. People mistake me being quiet for being shy, but I'm not shy. I don't think I'm even that quiet, it just looks that way because of how loud everyone else is. I prefer to sit and listen than be the focus of everything, unlike my teammates. There's too much pressure with being the center of attention, too many opportunities to fuck everything up. I'm much happier being an observer, watching from the outside.

Making my way into the kitchen, I grab a water from the refrigerator, taking another when I sense someone behind me.

"You ready for your official first party?" JJ says, accepting the bottle from my hand.

We both lean against the kitchen counter, looking into the living room. "I think so. Don't piss Robbie off is the only rule, right?"

JJ snorts as he unscrews the lid of his drink. "It happens to be my favorite pastime, but it depends how hard you want to be worked next season."

"I think I'll stay on his good side."

"Feel like home yet?" he asks, taking a sip of the water.

I've spent a lot of time with JJ over the past few weeks and have discovered that beneath the joker persona, he's very brotherly. After using my savings to buy myself an old truck a couple of months ago, I became the unofficial moving guy for everyone's boxes. It was nice

to feel useful, so it didn't bother me until Lola was worried her stuff would accidentally get shipped to Nate's new place in Vancouver and she drew dicks on the boxes that weren't hers or Stassie's.

JJ and I drove to his new place in San Jose with a truck bed full of the decorated boxes, getting funny looks from other drivers for the entire journey. You learn a lot about who someone is when you're stuck in an enclosed space with them for ten hours. Ironically, JJ joked that I give hardly anything away.

"Getting there," I admit. "Big change from what I'm used to."

"Remember, you belong here. Everyone wants you around, you hear me?" he says quietly.

I've never voiced my insecurities to any of the guys, but somehow JJ knows I keep myself on the outside of things. I called him perceptive once and he said it's because he's a Scorpio. Whatever that means.

I appreciate it anyway, and for the first time in a long time, I feel understood. Which is a strange feeling to accept, since a lot of the time I don't understand myself.

"I hear you," I confirm. He slaps me on the shoulder before heading back to his seat in the living room. I follow slowly, throwing myself into the seat beside Henry.

Robbie claps his hands once, giving us all hockey flashbacks as we instinctively give him our immediate attention like well-trained dogs.

"Such a mini-Faulkner. Jeez," Nate grumbles, shuffling uncomfortably in his seat.

"You know I flinch during rounds of applause now," Bobby adds. "I think it's an actual trauma response."

"I hear that clap when I'm alone," Mattie says, nodding in solidarity.

"Nah," Joe snorts. "That's Kris next door. Just the one. Clap her cheeks, singular."

Robbie hisses something under his breath as Kris launches a couch cushion at Joe, which he catches and throws back, chaos ensuing.

"Where were these defensive skills when you played hockey, Joe?" Henry asks, catching him off guard long enough for one of Kris's cushions to smack him right in the face.

"For fuck's sake," Robbie grumbles. "This party isn't going to happen if one of you clowns ends up with a concussion. Come on, one last time."

A natural silence settles over the room as everyone reluctantly lines up to be told what to do by Robbie, and there's a weird moment where I think it occurs to everyone that this is the last party the guys are going to throw together in this house.

I'm lost in my thoughts when JJ starts laughing and shouting. "Five bucks! You all owe me five bucks!"

"What?"

"Stas is crying!" He wraps his arm around her and kisses the side of her head. "And it's before she's had any alcohol! I win."

Wiping her tears away with the backs of her hands, she looks around bewildered. "You guys bet on me?"

The guys all reach for their wallets, plucking out bills. Mattie shrugs as he slams it into JJ's awaiting palm. "We technically bet on your tears."

"This is unbelievable. Nate, did you kn—" She turns to her boyfriend, who's discreetly pulling money from his pocket. "You're such a douche bag! You're all douche bags."

Nate hands his five-dollar bill to JJ and tugs her into a tight hug, kissing her temple affectionately. "You didn't even try to last. I could have bought you chicken wings with that money."

"Unbelievable. It's just so sad. You guys are all going your separate ways and there's just an atmosphere."

"If I told you Russ didn't bet on you crying today, would that make you feel better?"

Her watery eyes meet mine and she grins. “Thanks, muffin. You’re not on my shit list.”

I give her a nod of acknowledgment, letting her think it’s because I thought she wouldn’t cry—which I knew she would—instead of saying it’s because I don’t gamble.

“Excuse me,” Henry interrupts. “Neither did I.”

Henry also knew she would cry, but decided he doesn’t gamble anymore in solidarity. JJ is still counting his money when Lola strolls in with bags full of red cups. She looks along the line and scowls. “She cried, didn’t she?”

“Yup,” the room echoes.

“Goddamn it, Anastasia.” Lola drops the bags into Robbie’s lap, bending to kiss him, before reaching into her purse and pulling out some cash. “This is the last time you’re ever getting my money, Johal.”

“Until I fail at hockey and follow my true calling in life,” JJ counters. “Stripping.”

“Until then.”

“Now that everyone’s debts have been paid can we please get this shit show started?” Robbie groans.

The silence from earlier returns, the same shared thought running through my teammates’ minds one by one. Nate clears his throat, nodding. “One last time.”

The weird atmosphere disappears as soon as Lola burst out laughing. “All right, Alexander Hamilton. And I’m supposedly the dramatic one, jeez. Bunch of fucking drama queens.”

Chapter Two

AURORA

I’M NOT SUPPOSED TO BE here right now, but there’s something about basketball players that messes with my ability to exercise self-control.

I said I wasn’t coming and Emilia is already waiting for me at the hockey house, so I don’t know why I let Ryan freaking Rothwell convince me to abandon my plan and swing by. What is it about tall, muscular men who are good with their hands that makes me weak? It’s one of life’s great mysteries. One that half the women at Maple Hills are trying to figure out, judging by the crowd at this party.

With several of the team’s players graduating, tonight is their final party. Ryan and I said good-bye to each other four times last week and, as great as he is, we both know he’s not going to keep in touch. He has the NBA draft next month and I’m under no illusions I’ll be invited to sit courtside anytime soon. But that didn’t stop me from coming by just because he asked me to, which says more about me than it does about Ryan.

I’m minding my business, questioning all my life choices and nursing my drink in a quiet spot in the kitchen, when someone I wish was leaving slides along the counter beside me. My eyes instinctively

roll the second Mason Wright's mouth opens, but that doesn't stop him from bothering me.

He steals my drink from my grip—an act he knows I detest—and takes a sip. “Looking for your next victim, Roberts?”

God, I hate him. “Isn't it your bedtime, Wright?”

His eyes roam up and down my body and he smirks, making me internally gag. “Is that an invitation?”

Thankfully, I have no problem exercising self-control around this particular basketball player. “An invitation to fuck off and leave me alone? Yeah.”

He chuckles, and the idea of him finding joy in anything irritates me. I don't know where this kid got all his confidence, but he should bottle it and sell it. I've never known anyone, especially a freshman, as arrogant as this boy.

Returning my drink to me, he leans in a little closer. “You know playing hard to get turns me on, right?”

“I'm not playing, Mason. You can't get me.”

“And why's that?”

“Other than the fact I cannot stand you? You're a freshman.”

“You're four months older than me.” His eyebrows pinch together in frustration because God forbid a woman doesn't immediately fall to her knees in his presence.

“You're. A. Freshman,” I repeat.

He'd never believe any woman not being interested in him. Partially because he is very attractive, but mainly because he's overconfident as hell. He looks more like a stereotypical rock star than a basketball player. Tall, black hair, piercing blue eyes and pale skin with detailed tattoos decorating his arms and back. Sighing, I down the rest of my drink. “I don't like people who are younger than me.”

“Careful, princess.” He smothers a laugh with his hand and my eyes narrow. “Your daddy issues are showing.”

“The only issue I have is you.” I want to strangle him, but knowing Mason, he'd probably assume it was foreplay. “But speaking of daddies, how is Director Skinner?”

As arrogant as my archnemesis is, he does have one weakness: his dad. Nobody knows that his father is head of athletics at Maple Hills, and he wants to keep it that way, which is why he uses his mom's maiden name. You'd think both of us having issues with our dads would help us bond, but Mason and I have never gotten along, and a friendship will never develop over time. I can safely say I always will be patiently waiting for his downfall.

“Nice to know I'm the topic of yours and Ryan's pillow talk.” His signature smirk sinks into a scowl instantly and he reaches for the nearest liquor bottle. “I'm moving into Ry's room; did he tell you? I won't even change the code so you know how to get in.”

This kid does not know when to quit. “Aren't you cute. But seriously, Mason, can you give your dad my number? He's hot.” He's not. “And I want to be handed a position on the basketball team.”

“Oh fuck off, Aurora,” he grunts, slamming the bottle back onto the counter and stalking off toward the garden.

“Careful, princess!” I shout after him. “Your daddy issues are showing.”

Arms wrap around my waist from behind and I'm preparing to start throwing punches until I hear a deep voice I'm very familiar with. “I'm not bailing you out of jail if you kill him.”

“He told me I have daddy issues.” Ryan looks confused as I turn in his arms to face him, like he's not quite sure where this conversation is going. “It's only okay when I say it.”

He nods, finally understanding. “Gotcha. What did you say to piss him off?”

“I asked him for his dad's number so I could be given a spot on the basketball team.”

“Rory . . .” He drags out the *ry*, so I know I'm in trouble. “You

know that's supposed to be a secret. He's a sensitive little bean beneath that broody bad boy act."

It isn't my fault that Mason has a bad relationship with his dad. It doesn't exactly make him special and I never said the word *nepotism*.

"Well, if it was a secret, why did you tell me?"

Ryan leans down and kisses my forehead tenderly. "Because I know you hate him and I was trying to get into your pants."

"Hmm. I would have let you in anyway."

I would let Ryan Rothwell into my pants any day of the week. I have let Ryan Rothwell into my pants many days of the week, in fact. Ryan's a great guy, which is probably why I'm choosing to face Emilia's wrath for the sake of seeing him one last time.

My expectations for men are so low they're in the pits of hell, but Ryan is one of the good ones, and our friends-with-benefits situation over the past couple of months has been fun.

He has a bit of a reputation for string-free fun, and I firmly believe he should be awarded by the college for his services to women's happiness during his four years here.

They should erect a statue in his honor.

Maybe I'll ask Mason's dad about it.

His finger nudges under my chin, tilting my head up and dragging me from my thoughts. "I'm going to miss you, Roberts."

A response is stuck in my throat. Something like, "I'll miss you, too," or even a simple "thanks" would be enough, but the words won't come out. I hate that a few affectionate words, a simple gesture of friendship, a sign that the times we've spent together meant something to him, is enough to make me spiral.

Our relationship has always been purely physical. Not that he hasn't tried to make me stay over after hooking up, but hearing he'll miss me feels good, even if he does have a dozen other women to tell that to.

He sighs, almost like he can hear my racing thoughts, and pulls

me into a hug, sinking his face into my hair. "I'm gonna be jealous of the guy who gets to hear what happens in your head when you have that look on your face. Bring him to a game so I can launch a ball at his head."

"I don't think either of us needs to worry about that happening."

He laughs into my hair, still not letting go. "I'm just the stop gap. I'm the guy you fuck right before you meet the love of your life."

"Statistically, that's going to happen if you fuck everyone."

"Trust me, Roberts. I should start a money-back guarantee scheme. You'll get your happy ending."

"God, Ryan. Don't make me emotional when I'm about to head to a hockey party. You know being sad makes me horny."

He laughs as we reluctantly untangle and take a step back. "If you say being sad makes you horny two more times, Mason will appear like Beetlejuice."

I roll my eyes as I search out my nemesis, finding him inconveniencing someone else across the room, out of earshot. "Can you take him with you? I can't deal with him without you."

He tucks my hair behind my ear. "You told me you want to change this summer. Maybe you'll come back from camp and be able to tolerate him. You'll be more experienced with dealing with children."

"I said I wanted to grow out of all my toxic self-sabotaging habits. I did not say I would change enough to stop hating Mason."

"Maybe you should switch out some of those contemporary romance choices for self-help books."

My eyes narrow. "You complete one English degree and you think you're qualified to start handing out book recs?"

"You're right, Roberts. Let me just stay in my lane."

The good-bye is hanging in the air, but I can't quite force myself to say it. "You'll let me know how the draft goes, right?"

Kissing my forehead one last time, Ryan nods. "You bet. Stay out of trouble."

“Don’t I always?”

“Literally never,” he laughs. “That’s the problem.”

EMILIA MEETS ME AS I step out of my Uber, sporting the unimpressed scowl I know and love. “You’re late.”

It’s hard to be intimidated by her when she looks so angelic—literally. Her mousy brown curls have been braided into a halo, and the tip of her nose and cheeks are still red from sunburn after falling asleep in our garden yesterday. The rest of her has remained her normal shade of ghostly white, so I’m not sure how she managed to just fry her face. Something I won’t be bringing up right now. “Would it help if I told you how pretty you are?”

It doesn’t help and I lose her the second we walk through the door of the hockey house and past what appear to be life-size cardboard cutouts of the hockey team.

We tend not to visit these parties despite their campus-wide reputation, due to Emilia’s preference for events that end before midnight and my preference for basketball, but JJ, one of her friends from the LGBTQIA+ society, is heading up north to play hockey professionally and she promised to say bye.

So naturally I agreed to tag along because I’m a great friend, but also because she promised me a veggie pizza on the way home later. I am slightly worried that being late is going to mess with her willingness to buy me pizza.

Despite the hordes of people, it feels oddly homely for a college house occupied by hockey players. There are pictures in frames on the walls featuring a group of guys and two girls, couch cushions that don’t look like they’re harboring enough germs to start a biological war, and, unless my eyes deceive me, someone has dusted in here.

Is that a coaster?

Fighting my way through the crowd, mainly confused that my

feet aren’t sticking to the floor, but definitely thirsty, I head toward my favorite place at any party: the kitchen. The huge island is already covered in various half-empty liquor and soda bottles. My eyes scan the various cupboards trying to guess which one seems the most likely to hold glasses.

Party or not, I’ve watched too many documentaries about the sea to use plastic cups. I tentatively sneak a look in one of the cabinets to find nothing but shot glasses.

Literally.

Not one thing other than shot glasses in an entire kitchen cabinet.

The second cabinet has bowls, and as I’m about to find out if the third cabinet is the right one, feeling a lot like Goldilocks, someone clears their throat beside me. “Are you a burglar?”

Looking around the cupboard door, knowing my face is definitely the color of a stoplight, I take in the guy who just caught me red-handed. I’m five foot seven, even taller in my stilettos, but he still towers over me. However, there’s something decidedly unintimidating about him. His biceps are fighting to escape the sleeves of his black T-shirt, the fabric tight across his broad chest. But his features are soft, and there’s only a hint of stubble along his jaw; it’s like the delicacy of his face doesn’t quite match the rest of his body. His light brown hair is styled off his face and, when I finally settle on them, his sapphire-blue eyes stare back at me, something unsure but intrigued swimming in them.

This is probably the most awkward way I’ve ever met a hot guy.

I give him my most innocent smile. “Is it a burglary if it doesn’t leave the premises?”

“Oh damn, I knew I should have studied law.” His lip quirks up in the corner, dimples appearing beside his mouth as he fights a laugh. “I think burglary is taking something that doesn’t belong to you.”

“What if the owner never finds out?”

“Well, if the owner never finds out then surely that’s just negli-

gence on their part,” he says, rubbing a hand against the back of his neck. I try to keep looking at his face, not his bulging arms, but I’m weak. “What’re you looking for?”

He takes a step toward me, the strong smell of sandalwood and vanilla reaching me. He presses his hand against the door I’m still clinging to, closing it gently.

What am I looking for? “Glasses.”

“There are only plastic ones, sorry.”

“Do you know how much plastic ends up in the ocean? No one who lives here will know.” This is the longest conversation I’ve ever had about glasses. It’s possibly the longest conversation anyone has had about glasses, but I find myself thinking about what other kitchenware I can bring up to keep this going.

“So, this crime is for the sharks?”

“Well, not just the sharks. Fish, turtles, whales are all included.” His eyes close as he fights a smile, shaking his head. “Maybe an octopus or two. My good deeds don’t discriminate.”

Reopening his eyes, his hand lingers on the cabinet door for another few seconds before he takes a step around me and heads to cabinet six, opening it to reveal shelves of various mismatched glasses. “Don’t throw it at anyone or we’ll both be in trouble.”

Stretching onto my tiptoes, I take one with a Maple Hills emblem on it and one for Emilia that says “My friends went to LA pride and all I got was this glass.”

“You found those quickly. Have you burgled here before?” Stop talking, Aurora.

Placing them on the counter, I reach for the nearest liquor bottle, pouring its contents into what I’m calling my victory glasses. The helpful stranger laughs and opens a bottle of soda, sliding it in my direction. He waits until I’m about to pour to answer me. “No, I live here.”

Oh shit. His words catch me off guard and the soda bottle misses

the rim of the glass, covering the counter in fizzy, sticky liquid. Double shit. “Sorry, sorry, sorry!”

Before I even have a chance to react, he’s mopping up my mess with a dishcloth. “I’m s—”

“Don’t worry,” he says softly, stopping me before I can apologize again. “It’s just soda. Stand over there so you don’t get wet.”

I do as I’m told and watch as he produces a disinfectant spray, cleaning the counter properly among the drunk and oblivious people still trying to make their own drinks. When he’s done, he grabs the soda bottle and carefully fills both glasses, handing them to me.

“So you’re the one who dusts,” I mutter.

“What?”

“Nothing. Thank you . . . and sorry again.”

He leans against the counter “Sorry for breaking the stay-out-of-our-cabinets rule or for trashing the kitchen?”

Folding my arms across my chest, I purse my lips playfully. “I don’t see a sign.”

This time he really laughs. A deep rumble in his chest that seems genuine. I notice the way he watches me, discreetly looking me up and down. His attention makes my body buzz and I immediately want more of it. “You don’t strike me as the type of woman who would pay attention to a sign anyway.”

“And why is that?” It’s a loaded question. I know it. He knows it. The guys, who I assume are his teammates hovering close by trying to listen in, know it. “Answer carefully, we’ve got an audience.”

He pulls his eyebrows together as he turns to check behind him, and by the time he turns back to face me, the tips of his ears have turned pink. Our spectators scurry off, but it’s enough to have killed this guy’s confidence. I find his sudden shyness endearing. I’m used to being hit on, but I don’t think anyone has ever blushed in front of me. I want to find out what his first impression of me is. I want